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Opinion

Across the state

State test flawed, needs replacement

The Paducah Sun

A new study reinforces the view that the state's student testing system is badly flawed and should be replaced with more reliable measurements of academic performance.

Richard Innes, an education policy analyst for the Bowling Green-based Bluegrass Institute for Public Policy Solutions, studied the Commonwealth Accountability Testing System and concluded that it doesn't provide adequate information on the progress of students who have traditionally lagged behind in public school classrooms — minorities, children from poor families and students with disabilities.

The federal No Child Left Behind Education reform law requires states to closely track the performance of these students. Schools are held accountable if students don't make progress toward achieving academic goals.

Innes says the CATS test, which was designed to measure the performance of schools, not individual students, does not meet the standards of the No Child Left Behind accountability program. The state's testing policy "makes it impossible to track student performance over time," Innes writes. As a result, the state is escaping accountability for the performance of minorities and students with learning disabilities.

These are serious criticisms, especially given evidence that indicates students from poor families, especially minorities, are not making up academic ground in Kentucky. Without reliable testing data on individual students and student subgroups, the state education establishment can continue to leave children behind and not suffer any consequences.

But the root of the problem is not flawed testing policies — it's the test itself. The CATS test, like its discredited predecessor, the Kentucky Instructional Results Information System, does not give a clear, accurate picture of academic achievement. Therefore, CATS cannot serve as the foundation for a genuine accountability system.

Innes study notes the fundamental inadequacies of CATS: the performance of individual students can't be tracked, the test uses many open-response questions, which means there's a large element of subjectivity in the scoring; and, unlike Tennessee's value-added testing system, CATS doesn't provide information on the performance of teachers.

Another major flaw in CATS is that the test doesn't measure student progress

against the nation as a whole.

Education officials insist that Kentucky's education reform program is so advanced that the state's students would suffer if they were assessed with the basic tools used in nationally standardized tests.

In truth, scores on standardized tests matter. For instance, scores on the ACT test are used in college admissions because they are considered accurate predictors of college performance. But CATS scores have little significance outside the state's accountability system. Universities in Kentucky use scores on the ACT — not CATS — in making decisions on admissions.

Innes notes that serious questions have been raised about state education officials' use of a statistical tool called "confidence intervals" to massage scores used to assess student performance for the No Child Left Behind program.

Confidence intervals, which the Lexington Herald-Leader described as "a kind of statistical grade curve," may have allowed the state to nearly double the percentage of schools meeting the NCLB's performance targets.

Innes argues that the "misuse" of confidence intervals undermines accountability by giving an unrealistic impression of the performance of the schools. State education officials should live up to their own rhetoric about accountability and discard this questionable practice.

Accountability will remain a slippery concept in the state education system as long as the CATS test is used to judge the performance of the schools.

State education officials are preparing to make significant changes in the accountability system. This presents an opportunity for the state to adopt tests that will clearly measure student performance and allow for national comparisons.

Several prominent lawmakers and a group of school principals in northern Kentucky are pushing for the state to replace CATS with nationally standardized tests such as the ACT and the Iowa Test of Basic Skills. These respected tests — combined, perhaps, with "end-of-course" exams that assess what students have learned in specific subjects — would create the foundation for an effective accountability system in Kentucky.

It's time for Kentucky education leaders to fully acknowledge the testing problem and fix it.